

Commemorating the Seal

Over the past 225 years, the Great Seal has remained a constant symbol of sovereignty and independence for the United States, unlike other nations whose seals change with monarchs or regimes. Even so, slight variations occurred in some of the past dies of the Seal due to artistic interpretation or human error. In 1986 the Bureau of Engraving and Printing produced a master for the present die and counter-die for all future Seals. The master follows the 1904 Seal that engraver Max Zeitler prepared for the firm Bailey, Banks and Biddle of Philadelphia.

1841: FIRST VARIATIONS

The faulty design of John Peter Van Ness Throop's 1841 die caused people to call it the "illegal seal."

Some of the Differences:

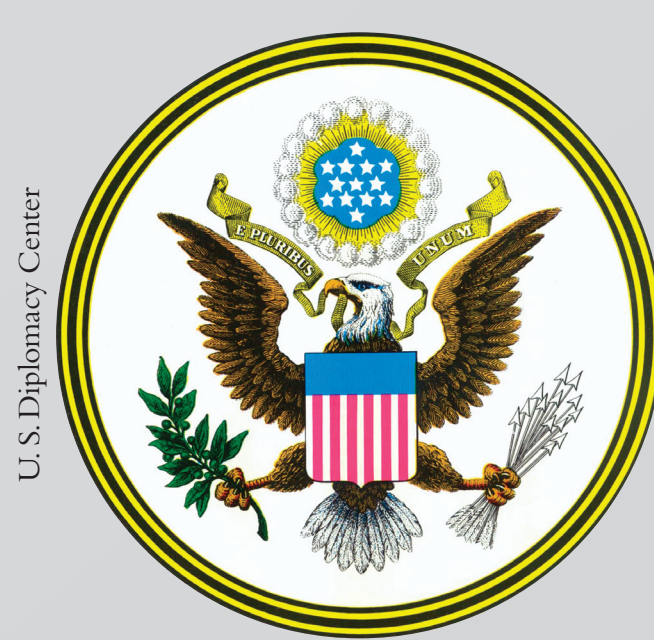
Changed stars from six to five points

Six, not 13 arrows

Added fruit to olive branch



Courtesy of the National Archives (#1516)



U.S. Diplomacy Center

1877: CENTENNIAL SPURS CHANGE

The 1876 Centennial prompted criticism of the Seal's "illegal" variations, which continued in the 1877 version of engraver Herman Baumgarten. The Department was unable to create a new die for the Centennial commemorations of the Seal in 1882.



Courtesy of the National Archives (#1516)

In 1885, James Horton Whitehouse created the pattern still used for the Seal today. The clouds form a complete circle, and the robust eagle grasps 13 arrows and 13 olive branches. The eagle's talons now grip from the back, rather than the front, as they did earlier.



James Horton Whitehouse, an exceptionally skilled engraver, researched the first Seal to recapture important details. In 1904 Max Zeitler created a crisper, more detailed copy of Whitehouse's die.

Scan from The Eagle and the Shield by Patterson and Dougall, page 255

THE REVERSE OF THE GREAT SEAL

Congress approved a written design for the Seal's reverse in 1782, specifically for hanging, or pendant, seals with fronts and backs. In 1815 the U.S. affixed its first pendant seal but only used the Seal's front. Once U.S. diplomats ceased applying the pendant device in 1871, the desire to strike a reverse waned. In 1885 Congress appropriated funds to cut a reverse, but the Department declined to order it, heeding the recommendation of scholarly advisors who did not favor its appearance.



In 1786 engraver James Trenchard created this version of the reverse with a stepped pyramid, a right Eye of Providence and mottoes in small print.



In 1856 artist Benson J. Lossing changed the eye from right to left, smoothed the pyramid's sides, deepened the perspective, and added plants. The mottoes became more prominent.

The One Dollar Bill
In 1935, when the U.S. government decided to place the Great Seal on the dollar bill, some distrusted the unfamiliar design of the reverse. They feared a Masonic "plot" and detractors of President Roosevelt read the motto "*Novus Ordo Seclorum*" as a sinister reference to the New Deal.

In fact, nothing on the Seal refers to any special group. The Founding Fathers accessed these symbols readily in print, art and coats of arms.

When President Roosevelt approved the new U.S. Treasury design in 1935, he noted two changes.

First, he moved the obverse to the right and the reverse to the left. Second, he added the words, "The Great Seal of the United States," placing the phrase "of the United States" so that is was underneath the eagle.

This was the first time the Great Seal appeared on U.S. currency. The dollar is one way people come into widespread contact with the reverse of the Seal.



Courtesy of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing



Courtesy of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing



President Roosevelt's notes on the dollar bill design, 1935.

1928: The design of the back of dollar bill before incorporating the Great Seal.

2007: Since 1935 the Seal has remained on the dollar bill.

BICENTENNIAL

The 200 Anniversary Commemoration
On June 1982 the Department of State held a special reception to mark the 200th Anniversary of the Great Seal. Secretary of State Alexander Haig spoke, received commemorative gifts from the U.S. Postal Service and the U.S. Capitol Historical Society and affixed a Seal to a document.

In his remarks about the Seal, Secretary Haig observed, "This symbol has reflected the hopes and dreams of both the founders of the country and we, their descendants."



U.S. Diplomacy Center

During the special commemorative event, Jane Mosellem, keeper of the Seal, guides Secretary Alexander Haig in affixing a Seal on the commission of a new Foreign Service Officer.



This 1882 Centennial medal by the U.S. Mint helped spark public interest in the Seal. Artist Charles E. Barber, closely following Trenchard's interpretation of the Seal.



The U.S. Capitol Historical Society commemorated both the 250th anniversary of George Washington's birth and the Seal's bicentennial on the medal. These plaster molds are part of the fabrication process.



Sculptor Elisabeth Gordon Chandler, created the bicentennial medal. The U.S. Capitol Historical Society described the Seal as symbolizing the "unity, strength and independence of the new United States."



For the 200th anniversary, the Post Office chose the Department as the first day of issue site for the embossed Seal envelope.